



World Conference on Social Sciences, Law and Public Policy

Hosted Online from Toronto, Canada

Date: 26th June 2026

Website: <https://econferencia.com>

NEW DIRECTIONS OF TOURISM COOPERATION BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES IN 2017–2026: A COMMON TOURISM SPACE, JOINT TOURISM ROUTES, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The article analyzes the qualitative changes that have occurred in Uzbekistan's cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in the field of tourism in 2017–2026. Regional openness, simplification of border procedures, restoration of transport links, the idea of a common tourist space, cross-border and thematic routes, digitalization, and cooperation with international organizations are highlighted as key areas. The impact of the pandemic, existing institutional challenges, and prospects until 2026 are also assessed using a historical-comparative approach.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Central Asia, tourism cooperation, common tourist space, Great Silk Road, cross-border route, pilgrimage tourism, ecotourism, digitalization, regional integration.

Since 2017, Central Asia has been identified as the priority direction of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. A new atmosphere based on good-neighborly relations, mutual trust, and pragmatic cooperation has fundamentally transformed regional tourism relations. The previously existing restrictions, including closed



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border crossings, complicated visa and registration procedures, and limited transport connectivity, have gradually been eased. Consequently, tourism has evolved from being merely an economic activity into an effective instrument of public diplomacy that strengthens regional ties while promoting shared historical memory and common cultural heritage.

The relevance of this study lies in the growing need to present Central Asia as a unified tourism destination. From the perspective of international visitors, the historical cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva are closely connected culturally and historically with Turkistan and Taraz in Kazakhstan, Osh and Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan, Panjakent and Hisor in Tajikistan, and Merv and Kunya-Urgench in Turkmenistan. Therefore, multi-country tourism packages are considerably more competitive in the global tourism market than itineraries confined to a single state.

The purpose of this research is to identify the new directions of tourism cooperation that emerged between 2017 and 2026 and to evaluate their historical significance and practical outcomes. The study employs historical, systematic, comparative, problem-chronological, and content analysis methods. Since the final statistical indicators for 2026 have not yet been fully compiled, this year is interpreted as a continuation of regional tourism programs and emerging development trends.

The Presidential Decree of 2 December 2016 on the accelerated development of tourism created the legal foundation for the reforms launched in 2017 [1]. In the following years, the expansion of visa-free regimes, the introduction of an electronic visa system, simplified temporary registration procedures, and government support for private tourism enterprises contributed significantly to increasing regional tourist flows. Furthermore, the revised Law "On Tourism", adopted in 2019, established a modern legal framework governing tourism



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services, tourist routes, safety standards, and public-private partnerships in accordance with international requirements [2].

The restoration of visa-free travel between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2018, together with the reopening of air and road connections, facilitated not only family visits but also the rapid growth of pilgrimage and cultural tourism. Improved border crossing procedures with Kyrgyzstan stimulated short-term travel along the Fergana Valley–Osh corridor. Likewise, enhanced railway and air transport links with Kazakhstan, particularly along the Tashkent–Shymkent–Turkistan corridor, became one of the most dynamic segments of regional tourism. In relations with Turkmenistan, opportunities remain for developing historical routes linking Khorezm with Dashoguz and Bukhara with Merv.

The Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia have also become an important political platform for regional tourism cooperation. Discussions concerning transport connectivity, cross-border trade, cultural exchanges, and the promotion of common historical heritage have transformed tourism from an isolated economic sector into an integral component of regional integration. The adoption of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution "Sustainable Tourism and Sustainable Development in Central Asia" in 2019 further strengthened the international legal basis for regional tourism cooperation [3].

The concept of a common tourism space does not imply the elimination of state borders; rather, it refers to creating an integrated tourism service environment for international visitors. Such an environment includes harmonized visa and border procedures, unified information resources, coordinated transport schedules, common marketing strategies, standardized tourism signage, and shared safety standards. Since 2017, the principle of "one trip – several countries" has increasingly influenced tourism policy, while initiatives such as the Silk Road



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Visa have been actively discussed. Although legal and technical challenges have prevented its full implementation, the initiative has significantly strengthened the perception of Central Asia as a single tourism destination.

Another essential element of the common tourism space is the development of a regional tourism brand. While each country continues promoting its national symbols and attractions, they can jointly capitalize on shared themes such as the Silk Road, the interaction between nomadic and sedentary civilizations, Islamic civilization, and the unique mountain and desert landscapes of Central Asia. In this context, Uzbekistan's historic cities serve as the gateway to the region, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan represent centers of nature-based and adventure tourism, Tajikistan specializes in mountain and archaeological tourism, while Turkmenistan complements the regional product through its ancient oasis civilization and desert heritage.

Digitalization has become one of the principal instruments connecting the common tourism space. Electronic visas, online registration systems, remote booking of railway and airline tickets, QR-code museum services, digital maps, and mobile tourist guides have considerably simplified independent travel across several Central Asian countries. Nevertheless, issues such as the integration of digital platforms, multilingual online content, uninterrupted electronic payment systems, and reliable internet coverage in border areas still require further improvement.

The most significant practical manifestation of this new stage of cooperation is the development of joint cross-border tourism routes. Historically and culturally significant itineraries include Tashkent–Shymkent–Turkistan, Samarkand–Panjakent, Fergana–Osh, Khiva–Kunya-Urgench–Dashoguz, and Bukhara–Merv. These routes combine ancient trade networks, architectural monuments, pilgrimage sites, and traditional handicraft centers into integrated tourism



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products. The inscription of the Silk Roads: Zarafshan–Karakum Corridor on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2023 as a transnational property encompassing Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan represents international recognition of this regional approach [4].

Ecological and adventure tourism also possesses considerable development potential through integrated programs linking the Western Tien Shan, Ugam–Chatkal National Park, Chimgan–Charvak recreational zone, the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Issyk-Kul Lake, as well as the Hisor and Pamir regions of Tajikistan. In the field of pilgrimage tourism, regional routes connecting the heritage of Imam al-Bukhari, Bahauddin Naqshband, Hakim al-Tirmidhi, Ahmad Yasawi, Burhanuddin al-Marghinani, and other prominent Islamic scholars can create highly attractive tourism products for visitors from Muslim-majority countries [5]. Gastronomic and ethnographic tourism further enhances regional competitiveness by integrating traditional Central Asian cuisine, bread-making traditions, handicrafts, folk music, equestrian culture, and national festivals into unified thematic tourism programs.

Table 1. Main New Directions of Tourism Cooperation between Uzbekistan and the Central Asian States (2017–2026)

Direction	Content	Expected Outcome
Common Tourism Space	Harmonization of visa policies, border procedures, transport connectivity, and information systems	Reduction in travel costs and travel time for tourists
Joint Tourism Routes	Development of historical, pilgrimage, and ecotourism itineraries covering several countries	Longer tourist stays and increased demand for tourism services across the region
Unified Marketing	Joint promotion based on the Silk Road and Central Asia tourism brand	Enhanced competitiveness in long-haul international tourism markets



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Kazakhstan represents one of Uzbekistan's largest tourism markets in Central Asia and serves as a strategic gateway to the region's northern transport corridors. The Tashkent–Shymkent–Turkistan route combines historical and pilgrimage tourism, while connections between Almaty and Tashkent promote urban, business, and leisure tourism. The active participation of tour operators from both countries in international tourism exhibitions and forums has facilitated the development of joint tourism packages. In this context, linking Turkistan and Samarkand as two major centers of Turkic-Islamic civilization offers significant marketing potential [6].

Cooperation with Kyrgyzstan is primarily characterized by geographical proximity and the complementary nature of the tourism products offered by both countries. Uzbekistan's historic cities naturally complement Kyrgyzstan's mountain, lake, and adventure tourism resources. The Fergana Valley–Osh–Issyk-Kul route is particularly suitable for self-drive tourism, gastronomic tours, and small-group travel. Nevertheless, further progress requires increasing seasonal transport services, improving roadside infrastructure, and establishing fast-track procedures for tourist vehicles at border checkpoints [7].

Tourism cooperation with Tajikistan is centered on the Samarkand–Panjakent, Termez–Dushanbe, and Zarafshan Valley routes. The shared Sogdian heritage, ancient archaeological sites, mountain landscapes, and pilgrimage destinations provide opportunities to integrate historical, archaeological, ecological, and cultural tourism. The normalization of bilateral relations after 2018 restored direct people-to-people contacts and created new demand for short-term cross-border tourism packages. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Zarafshan–Karakum Corridor as a transnational World Heritage property has strengthened the international significance of this cooperation.



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Although tourism cooperation with Turkmenistan remains relatively limited, its historical and cultural potential is considerable. The Khiva–Dashoguz–Kunya-Urgench and Bukhara–Merv routes have the capacity to connect the civilizations of Khorezm, the Karakum Desert, and the ancient oasis cultures within a single historical narrative. In the future, the practical effectiveness of this cooperation could be significantly enhanced through coordinated visa procedures for organized tourist groups, charter flights and bus services, harmonized package pricing, and joint promotion of UNESCO World Heritage sites.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Recovery Mechanisms

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 exposed the structural vulnerabilities of regional tourism in Central Asia. Temporary border closures, suspension of international flights, and differing sanitary regulations almost completely halted joint tourism routes. At the same time, the crisis highlighted the growing importance of domestic and short-distance regional tourism. Enhanced sanitary protocols, digital tourism services, small-group travel, and increasing demand for outdoor destinations shaped a new model of tourism recovery [8].

The post-pandemic recovery demonstrated that neighboring-country tourism markets recovered considerably faster than long-haul international tourism. This experience confirmed that regional tourism based on road and railway transport is more resilient than tourism dependent exclusively on distant international markets. Consequently, the development of recreational areas in border regions, handicraft clusters, pilgrimage destinations, and family-operated guesthouses has become an important regional priority [9]. The hosting of the 25th Session of the UNWTO General Assembly in Samarkand in 2023 further strengthened Uzbekistan's position in regional and global tourism diplomacy [10].



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Conclusion

The period from 2017 to 2026 represents a new historical stage in tourism cooperation between Uzbekistan and the countries of Central Asia. Strengthened political trust, the liberalization of border and visa procedures, improved transport connectivity, and active cooperation with international organizations have transformed tourism into an effective instrument of regional integration. Although the concept of a Common Central Asian Tourism Space has not yet evolved into a fully institutionalized system, it is gradually taking shape through joint marketing initiatives, cross-border tourism routes, digital services, and complementary national tourism products.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Central Asia's principal competitive advantage in the global tourism market lies not in the individual strengths of its separate states but in their shared civilizational heritage, diverse natural landscapes, and complementary tourism resources. To transform regional cooperation into a sustainable and competitive tourism model, it is essential to introduce multi-country visa mechanisms, coordinate transport policies, establish unified information standards, promote joint professional training, and strengthen environmental sustainability. Under these conditions, the concept of "One Journey – All of Central Asia" can become a realistic and globally competitive tourism product.

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